

# Akusala

## The Nature of Poison

By  
Venerable Sayādaw U  
Nandamālābhivamsa



Sagaing Hills, Myanmar

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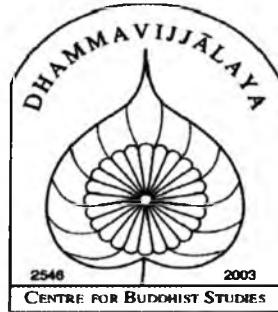


## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sayādaw Dr Nandamālābhivamsa, born in Myanmar (Burma) in 1940, was educated in Mandalay and with 16 years of age he already passed Dhammācariya (Dhamma-teacher) and then the most difficult Bhivamsa-examination. He also studied in Sri Lanka at the Kelaniya University in Colombo (M.A.) and got his Ph.D. in India. Because of his excellent knowledge of the Buddhist scriptures and his teaching experience he was rewarded many high distinctions and titles.

In Myanmar together with his elder brother he is leading the traditional, well-reputed study-monastery “Mahāsubhodayon” in Sagaing Hills. He is rector of the “International Theravāda Buddhist Missionary University” in Yangon and of “Sītagū International Buddhist Academy” in Sagaing. In Myanmar and abroad, since some years in Europe too, he is giving courses mainly on Abhidhamma for Western Vipassanā-teachers, -students and meditators.

He is the founder and leader of Dhammavijjālaya, Centre for Buddhist



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Sabbadānaṃ dhammadānaṃ jināti  
The Gift of Dhamma excels all gifts

**Akusala:**  
**The Nature of Poison**

Venerable Sayādaw U Nandamālābhivamsa

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**Namo tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa**

**Veneration to the Exalted One, the Homage-Worthy,  
the Perfectly Self-Enlightened.**

The Buddha is an Arahāt and he is worthy of the highest veneration. All beings including devas and brahmās venerate the Buddha because the Buddha is the Supreme One, who has extinguished all defilements, who has become perfectly self-enlightened through the realization of the Four Ariya Truths, and who is endowed with the six great qualities of glory, namely, Issariya (supremacy), Dhamma (knowledge of the path to Nibbāna), Yasa (fame and following), Siri (noble appearance), Kāma (power of accomplishment) and Payatta (diligent mindfulness).



## Preface

An Abhidhammic approach to some aspects of unwholesomeness, **Akusala: The nature of poison**, are a series of talks given by Venerable U Nandamālābhivamsa in Naarden, Netherlands, Penang, Malaysia and Singapore from 2005 to 2007.

Sayādaw says "The Lord Buddha always pointed out first the harmful: what should not be done. As in: 'Not to do evil, To cultivate good' (Sabbapāpassa akaraṇam, kusalassa upasampadā). The reason being not doing evil (akusala) is more important than not doing good (kusala). However "To cultivate good" goes

## Preface

together with "Not to do evil". If we cultivate good -- non-greed (alobha) for instance -- greed (lobha) is gone. We must try to find delight in good, though it would be like going upstream against the current."

We hope that Malaysian Sayālay Amaranandi will transcribe the series of talks on "Kusala" for the benefit of many and we say Sādhu Sādhu Sādhu to her for this compilation of **Akusala: The nature of poison**.

So it is vitally important that we become familiar with **Akusala: The nature of poison**, and try to penetrate deeply into its meaning. Sayādaw presented this information guided by his own great intellect. He added a sense of humour and congeniality to his talks by sharing some of his personal experience.



## Preface

Sayādaw is very precise and dependable in his presentation. It has been our hope to emulate his fine example in this reviewing. Nonetheless it is possible that some mistakes have escaped notice. Please write to Bro. Chew How Ting's blog:

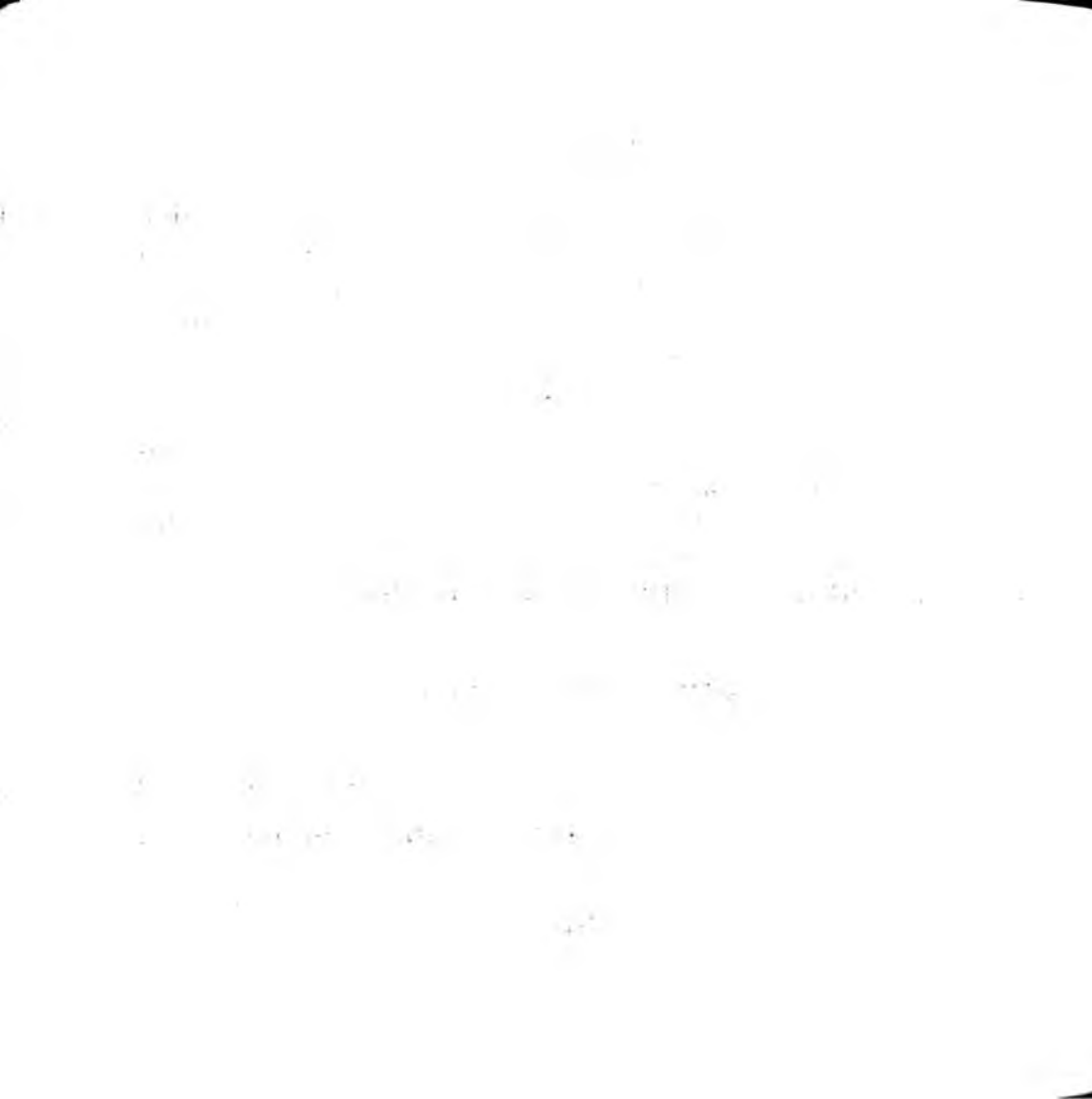
<http://fundamentalabhidhamma.blogspot.com/>

So that he can correct them for the next edition. We apologise to the readers for those and accept fully the demerit that comes from lack of skillfulness. At the same time we hope that much merit may result from the sharing of **Akusala: The nature of poison**.

Sādhu! Sādhu! Sādhu!

Pauline Chong

Malaysian Student, August 2012



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Akusala: The nature of poison

Namo tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa

## **Akusala: The nature of poison**

If we do not know poison as poison, how dangerous it is for us. Say, if someone were to give us two dishes of food to eat, one that is poisoned, the other not, which is more important to know? Obviously, it is the dish with the poison. Otherwise, should we eat it we will be harmed.

The Lord Buddha always pointed out first the harmful: what should not be done.

## Akusala: The nature of poison

The reason being not doing evil (akusala) is more important than not doing good (kusala) -- just sleeping for instance -- as less harm is done. In the Buddha Dhamma what leads to a good result is alright. Whatever that does not is not alright.

Indeed, ignorance of what is good or bad is more important than ignorance of anything else, such as knowing English, or knowing how to drive.

Good and bad are dhammas or natural law -- being ultimate realities their nature cannot be changed. They are not the Buddha's invention.

In the definition of akusala<sup>1</sup>, it is the opposite of

---

<sup>1</sup> Akusala = a (opposite of, in contradiction to) + kusala (meritorious, wholesome, moral).

## Akusala: The nature of poison

kusala<sup>2</sup> which is a phenomenon that removes evil. So akusala is anything unmeritorious or unwholesome.

Akusala's nature is with fault and is blameworthy; it brings ill-result or danger to anyone of whatever religion (not just Buddhism alone) or race. Like eating the dish of poisoned food, whoever does akusala is harmed. Certain chemicals, even in small amounts, are bad for the health if taken. They poison us little by little. If taken in sufficient quantity, they cause our death. It is the same with akusala -- very bad akusala can take immediate effect.

In contrast, kusala is without fault and brings about good, happy effects. Like water, whoever uses it is purified. Dirty things get washed out.

---

2 Kusala = ku (evil) + sala (to remove, eradicate).

## Akusala: The nature of poison

To distinguish between good and bad are two criteria:

- one has regret/no regret having done something,
- one experiences its result happily/unhappily.

To start with, we must know the difference between the two. Check your thoughts in daily life. For example, if you see some beautiful flowers, the thought might arise, "I want to pluck them for my dining table." Or you think of offering them to the Buddha image.

Good or bad, these dhammas are in all of us, everybody knows them. Don't think greed is Your property alone. Everybody has it. Is there anyone too who has never been jealous or angry? Usually we



### Akusala: The nature of poison

experience more of the bad dhammas -- less of the good. The mind, being weak, delights in evil. In any ordinary person, unwholesome mental states are very clever and quick to invade and pollute the mind, helped by habitual practice.

### **Treating a mental disease**

Like taking a medicine that cures our sickness, we have to cultivate wholesomeness as we cannot remove akusala within us directly. First we have got to see a doctor who prescribes the medicine as we can't treat the illness by ourselves. The doctor too cannot do anything if we do not take the medicine afterwards. If we do not learn and apply the Dhamma to our lives, but keep it on the shelf, we will not be cured.

### Akusala: The nature of poison

“Not to do evil, to cultivate good (Sabbapāpassa akaraṇaṃ, kusalassa upasampadā),” the Buddha advised in the Dhammapada [183]. The two go together. No extra step is needed: when we switch on the light, darkness disappears simultaneously. If we cultivate good -- non-greed (alobha) for instance -- greed (lobha) is gone.

We must try to find delight in good, though it would be like going upstream against the current. Naturally, it is easier to go downstream, as we all know. And in rowing we must not stop, or we will be pushed back. So it is going to be hard work but well worth the effort.

\* \* \*

It's only human to enjoy, but ...

## **It's only human to enjoy, but ...**

Hunters in the Himalayas in ancient times used to catch monkeys by applying a sticky substance like birdlime on tree branches where monkeys frequent. Clever monkeys would never approach; only foolish ones -- being full of curiosity to know everything -- would draw near to touch this shiny glue as powerful as superglue. On touching it, the paw can't be drawn back. To pull it back, the monkey uses the other paw. It also gets stuck on the branch. He next tries with a foot which becomes stuck too. Then the other foot also. Only left with the muzzle free, he uses it to try pull himself away. It also gets stuck. So five places are stuck fast to the branch. The hunter can now catch him at will.

It's only human to enjoy, but ...

That is how the Lord Buddha explained about the five kinds of sensual pleasures which are like "monkey lime". Do not grasp it after seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching. If not, you cannot pull away after that, stuck fast like the poor monkey. After seeing a beautiful object, hearing nice music, tasting a delicious flavour ...

Delight in sense pleasures is nothing special to everyone. We live in a world of senses and it is human nature for desire to arise through the senses. Many of us think of ways to enjoy ourselves everyday, search for means to do so, and never think about good or bad. I once saw a driver with earphones at the red lights of a junction. Alone, he was shaking his body and bouncing up and down, obviously to some pop music. Even animals like dogs and cats search to enjoy themselves. Look at cats: happy to smell fish being fried and happier

It's only human to enjoy, but ...

to eat it.

Many search for good taste: if there is no nice food at home, they go to a restaurant. They eat not only for health but like to try out new cuisines. Some know that certain foods are not good for their condition, yet they cannot resist. Some want comfort: to sleep on luxurious beds, relax on soft cushions, wear silky fabrics. Many companies get rich nowadays selling their perfumes, CDs and videos, clothes and food.

Wars have been waged, territories colonised for the sake of sense indulgence. I read that Malaysia and Indonesia were once famed for their spices. So rare these were in those days that the Portuguese, Dutch and British had to come in search of these costly ingredients to give their food and beverage a better taste and

It's only human to enjoy, but ...

aroma.

When I was studying in Sri Lanka I saw "The Love Boat", a TV series about people who, not finding enjoyment at home, search for it on a cruise. Even the elderly were going after enjoyment and crying when they had to part after the trip.

People do not realise that attachment to such indulgences is unwholesome. They think it is a human right. Any parent should know. Just try stopping your youngster from going out to have fun. You will get shouted at: "Don't violate my rights -- it's my own life."

In the West it is common to hear this line: "Life's too short, enjoy while you can." There is no law court, no one, to judge you if you indulge yourself. After all it is

It's only human to enjoy, but ...

commonly held to be only human nature to want enjoyment.

“Attractive things have always existed in the world, for them, the wise have removed the desire.”  
(Saṃyutta Nikāya)

Happiness can be obtained in many ways. If it is through a nice object, taste, thought, etc., we find that the happiness does not last. Just consider: viewing your nice object, how long can you sustain your pleasure? It is only momentary. How long can you remain eating your favourite food?

People think the Buddha -- always talking about anicca (impermanence), dukkha (unsatisfactoriness),

It's only human to enjoy, but ...

and asubha (foulness) -- rejects all kinds of beauty. On the contrary He appreciated beauty as it is but without attachment. He never advised us to abandon desirable objects or destroy them; or to close the eyes. He called only for restraint.

His advice: If you see something you fancy with the eye, you have to control the mind not to let unwholesome thought (of greed, hatred and ignorance) arise. Otherwise we might want to see it again and again, to get more of it with greed. This desire if repeated grows into grasping. Then on losing the object, unhappiness arises. For example, if I am attached to this watch, I will have worry about it -- I might drop it and get it spoilt, or lose it. Other people's watches do not concern me whether they are ruined or not. Whoever has a family will have worries about them and their property. About other families, there is no such worry.



It's only human to enjoy, but ...

It is not the object but the mind we must control. The two should be like two pieces of paper that do not stick together -- without monkey lime to glue mind and object together. We should not do away with the nice sense objects; we can continue to keep them in our home and garden. They are not dangerous; only our desire for them is dangerous.

“ I've seen your roots, Desire (kāma)  
In a man's own thought (saṅkappa) they lie  
I'll no more think of you  
And you, Desire, shall never arise. ”

Gangamāla Jātaka (421)

\* \* \*

The quality of an evil mind

## **The quality of an evil mind**

If the nature of consciousness (citta) is only bare awareness, how can it take on evil qualities?

At its starting point, we cannot say that a citta is good or bad. Take the analogy of water: water is just water which is colourless. If you add salt to it, it acquires a salty taste; if sugar is added, it becomes sweet. If we were to add a black dye to it, it turns black. If impure things are added, then it turns poisonous and cannot be drunk. In the same way the normal mind at the start is pure like water ( $H_2O$ ). When citta and mental states (cetasikas) join together, getting energy -- like the hydrogen (H) and oxygen (O) atoms combining to form water  $H_2O$  -- mind is formed. Like water the mind quality

### The quality of an evil mind

also changes through association with different mental states, good and bad.

To show their nature, we have to separate them into components. In reality though, this cannot be done.

So the mind's original quality changes with the mental states. If the citta associates with an akusala thought, it becomes impure (associating with a good mental state, it becomes pure).

#### 14 mental defilements:

1. ignorance (moha)
2. shamelessness (ahirika)
3. fearlessness (anottappa)

### The quality of an evil mind

4. restlessness (uddhacca)
5. greed (lobha)
6. wrong view (ditṭhi)
7. conceit (māna)
8. hatred/fear (dosa)
9. envy/jealousy (issā)
10. stinginess (macchariya)
11. remorse (kukkucca)
12. sloth (thīna)
13. torpor (middha)
14. doubt (vicikicchā)

## The quality of an evil mind

25 good mental states:

1. faith (saddhā)
2. mindfulness (sati)
3. moral shame (hiri)
4. moral dread (ottappa)
5. non-attachment (alobha)
6. non-hatred (adosa)
7. equanimity (tatramajjhattatā)
8. tranquility of mental factors (kāya-passaddhi)
9. tranquility of mind (citta-passaddhi)
10. lightness of mental factors (kāya-lahutā)
11. lightness of mind (citta-lahutā)
12. pliancy of mental factors (kāya-mudutā)

### The quality of an evil mind

13. pliancy of mind (citta-mudutā)
14. adaptability of mental factors (kāya-kammaññatā)
15. adaptability of mind (citta-kammaññatā)
16. proficiency of mental factors (kāya-pāguññatā)
17. proficiency of mind (citta-pāguññatā)
18. rectitude of mental factors (kāyujukatā)
19. rectitude of mind (cittujukatā)
20. right speech (sammā vācā)
21. right action (sammā kammanta)
22. right livelihood (sammā ājīva)
23. compassion (karuṇā)
24. sympathetic joy (muditā)

The quality of an evil mind

25. wisdom (paññindriya).

## **Citta**

Citta is neither good nor bad.

Good and bad are mutually exclusive, that is, they cannot arise together (there being no such thing as a mixture of grey). People most of the time remain on the "black" side hence akusala is the more popular state. For instance, anger and fear should be familiar to you, to me, all of us. Indeed, we were born with anger. When we were hungry, thirsty, or hot, as babies we showed our anger by crying.

Why are some people called good and some bad?

## The quality of an evil mind

This depends on the quality and by association. We should be aware that by habitual association and indulgences, human qualities also can change. For instance if we were to mix with drunkards or fools all the time, not only is our dignity lowered, we also become bad; and end up being called a bad person. That is why in the Maṅgala Sutta, the Buddha advised us not to associate with fools.

## How unwholesomeness arises

An akusala citta emerges depending on the three roots of evil -- greed, hatred and ignorance (or lobha, dosa and moha) -- and certain conditions. Why do plants and trees grow? It is because of the root that supports them and supplies them with nourishment. For instance as long as the root of attachment remains, all thought, talk or action remains with lobha.



## The quality of an evil mind

Always present too in any unwholesome mind are the four universal bad mental states. One is moha (ignorance) which does not know what should or should not be done. Because of it, it deludes us into acting as we wish. It is aided by ahirika (shamelessness) and anottappa (fearlessness) whereby we are not ashamed or fearful of misconduct. Any evil mind is also not peaceful due to uddhacca (restlessness). You might see a fisherman sitting on a bank, looking concentrated and peaceful. On the contrary, the mind is restless, wondering whether the fish is big or small.

For an akusala citta to appear one crucial condition is attention, right or wrong (yoniso manasikāra and ayoniso manasikāra). Imagine if someone were to start scolding you, using abusive words. With right attention or yoniso manasikāra, you might think, "He's

## The quality of an evil mind

using bad words. I don't accept them or let anger arise. Whatever he's saying doesn't affect me." In this way you are following the Buddha's example:

One day a brahmin approached Him with abuse: "You're a buffalo, a dog ..." and so on. Then the Buddha responded with a smile: "I'll ask you something: If a visitor comes to your house and you offer him gifts, but he doesn't take them. Whose gifts are these then?"

The brahmin replied, "I'll use them because they are my property."

To this the Buddha said, "You used abusive words which I don't accept. They are therefore only your property, not mine." (Sāmyutta Nikāya)

## The quality of an evil mind

But with wrong attention (ayoniso manasikāra), you might think, "How dare he use such abusive words! This I can't accept. I'm not that patient." With the thought then, you might snap back, "Shut up!"

Another two important conditions are saññā (perception) and vedanā (feeling). Should we consider something or someone to be beautiful, greed or attachment arises. If we consider it ugly, dislike comes into being. So like and dislike results through saññā. If it is strong, attachment or hatred is also strong. You might have noticed it for yourself. If you have an enemy, whenever you see him or her, hatred appears. Or if it is someone you love, love arises when you think of that person.

## The quality of an evil mind

When saññā changes, feeling follows suit, as shown in the following story that took place in a remote village. On a visit to sell goods, some merchants arrived there after dark. So they had to stay the night. The villagers offered them dinner of rice, curry and noodle (mont dee) soup. As the visitors thought the soup was especially tasty, they drank a lot of it. What they could not finish they kept in a container, thinking to have it for breakfast the next day.

In the morning, they brought out what they thought was the noodle soup -- at night there had been no electricity to see clearly. When they saw that it was not noodles but earthworms, they vomited in disgust. The night before they were happily enjoying the soup, now they could not bear to touch it with their hand. This is all because of saññā which can deceive us and lead us to intensify our love or hate.

## The quality of an evil mind

### **Fear of fire**

Insects that are not afraid of candlelight will be drawn to the flame and be consumed. Many people are like that: they like to play with akusala and are likewise, eventually "burnt".

The Buddha's main teaching aims to remove the "black" side of us by developing the "white". He always advises us to contemplate the mental situation: it is vital to know whatever arises, whether it is with greed, hatred or delusion. Not knowing, we would never be able to remove it. If we fear evil -- like the fear of fire -- we would never approach it. Or even consider doing so because we already know the outcome.

\* \* \*

What's love all about?

## **What's love all about?**

Who do you love most in your life?

Contrary to what many people might say, it is your own self, said the Buddha. Everyone considers his or her self first due to self-interest and selfishness. If you were to search in all directions for a person who loves another more than himself, you may not be able to find such a person. So there is no other lover like oneself: as the Buddha said, only oneself is most loved.

One thus searches to preserve oneself, to live longer and lead a better life. That is everybody's wish due to the root of craving (*taṇhā*) that is centred on

What's love all about?

oneself. One's own happiness comes first over the others'. If that is so, why bother to marry?

If one's own enjoyment is not enough, one has to search for others. For one's own enjoyment, one loves the other(s). That one loves the others is because one loves oneself, one's own happiness and enjoyment. Seeing others, one feels happy and thus one gets married.

I think many parents love their happiness more than their children. Through their children they feel happy. As long as their offspring do not destroy their happiness, it is acceptable. If not, the son or daughter is told "Don't come to the house again." They will put a notice in the newspapers, "So-and-so is no longer my son/daughter." For example, a son has become a drug

What's love all about?

addict and causes his parents suffering. They can no longer "love" him -- all because he has destroyed their happiness. This they won't accept -- their reaction is due to taṇhā or craving. But many think it is love. If we really love our children, no matter what happens, we should continue to love them despite their actions, and not kick them out of the house or disown them.

## **The biggest attachment of all**

The biggest attachment is bhavataṇhā (craving for existence). We might think we do not have it but at dying, it becomes very strong. This is because everybody likes life's existence.

Though all must die, nobody wants to. For those mentally abnormal in great suffering, they become



What's love all about?

suicidal because they hate their life. Looking for a better life or a better situation, their wish is to escape.

Due to taṇhā all kinds of diṭṭhi or wrong view appear. For instance, because one wants to live forever, many cling to the idea that there is an atta (permanent entity or self) with the body as its property. Some people even search for medicine to prevent decay and death, especially the rich who spend a lot for anti-aging. Is it possible to remain young forever? In Myanmar there is the philosopher's ball in alchemy. I know some alchemists though they have passed away. They used to put the ball in water to drink regularly. Yet when they fall sick, they had to go to the doctor for medicine and injections.

All these views -- whether of eternalism or

### What's love all about?

annihilation -- depend on selfish interest. Both diṭṭhi and self-centredness support each other. Thinking of one's atta, one is afraid of death.

To look after this permanent entity leads one to do merit (as insurance). This is to guarantee a better life in the future. Thus this view is associated with craving. Indeed many Buddhists offer dāna to ensure a better rebirth: to be rich or to be a deity. Nobody would pray for a worse life.

Many Buddhists pray, "May I attain Nibbāna (Idaṃ me puñña. Nibbānassa paccayo hotu)." But if someone were to call them to Nibbāna there and then, many might hesitate. As Nibbāna is a state in which mind and matter become completely extinct, it cannot be known with attachment. As long as we have attachment, we

What's love all about?

cannot like Nibbāna.

This was the case with a devotee in Mandalay:

Every morning he would go to pay homage at the Mahāmuni Pagoda, wishing loudly, "May I attain Nibbāna."

A friend wanted to test if it was really his wish. So one morning, dressed as a god, he went early to hide behind the Buddha statue. As the devotee was praying, he emerged and announced: "I'm the King of the gods. You have been praying for a long time now. So I've come to bring you to Nibbāna. Come, follow me."

The man, eyes wide-opened in fear, replied, "Please give me a week. I've got to go home to discuss with my family."

"Only one week. I can't wait beyond that."

What's love all about?

Thinking "What to do?" the man went home and reported to his wife.

She said, "Oh, Nibbāna is so hard to get to. Why did you come back?"

"But you'd be alone with the children. Is that possible or not?"

"Don't think about such things. I can cope. You must go there," she replied.

"But if you don't want to consider, I must consider."

His friend was listening and laughing at the same time.

As long as there is attachment, we will want to remain in life, attached to saṃsāra. Bhavataṇhā is so strong we want to remain, not disappear for good.

What's love all about?

\* \* \*

Mistaking evil for good

## **Mistaking evil for good**

Let's say someone starts to scold you. You keep silent all the while though inside you are burning with anger. You might think you are having khanti (patience) as many people would think when they advise, "Be patient, keep silent and don't reply," for such a trying situation.

You are mistaken because khanti is a high level attainment; it is not just keeping quiet with a burning heart. That silence is akusala -- only that it is not openly shown. Khanti is the mind's ability to remain just as normal and unaffected before and after the incident. And when some people tell you, "My patience has a limit," remember then that it is a limited form of patience, not

## **Mistaking evil for good**

like the real khanti.

It is good to have some knowledge of mental properties, how they function and affect our daily life through the study of Abhidhamma. This way we can decide by checking our mind whether we really have good mental states. We may have been under the impression all this while that some of our attitudes are wholesome; while some Abhidhamma knowledge would show us otherwise.

## **Greed or mere wish to do?**

All people have wishes and wants. What sets the two apart is what we do with it. We might want to receive some property to offer as dāna: that is chanda or wish to do. Or we want it for our own enjoyment -- that

### Mistaking evil for good

is with attachment or lobha. Even in dāna: if we offer for the sake of ensuring a better life in the future, then our act of donating is mixed with attachment.

People sometimes ask: "If we wish to attain Nibbāna, is that chanda or lobha?"

In wishing to attain Nibbāna, some think it is the supreme happiness because the monk said so. So they want to enjoy the bliss of Nibbāna. That is lobha which always attaches to the object (of desire) -- unlike chanda. Attached to happiness, they then wish to attain this state, thinking, "I'll be happy forever in Nibbāna." Nibbāna to them seems like a place of happiness where they can enjoy themselves eternally.

An old lady from my village once asked me,



### Mistaking evil for good

"When I attain Nibbāna, will I be able to smoke there?" thinking of taking along her cigarettes because of her attachment to smoking.

So I had to explain, "No, you can't because Nibbāna is a non-smoking area."

On the contrary, a person who dislikes all types of suffering -- who wants to escape and be freed from birth, decay, disease and aging -- wants to stop such suffering by attaining Nibbāna. This is chanda. It is just the wish to do: to offer dāna, observe sīla, and practise meditation, not for the sake of enjoyment or future expectation.

When chanda is developed, it can control lobha. The Bodhisatta as Sumedha could give up all his wealth.

### **Mistaking evil for good**

As a very rich man, he realised that those who had accumulated such wealth had died but their property could not follow them. Being so, he thought these were useless then. Because of chandāhipati (chanda that dominates associated states), he abandoned all to search for the Dhamma. Normally it is quite impossible for a wealthy person to relinquish everything -- without chanda. So chanda or the wish to do makes the impossible possible, unlike lobha.

### **Is it love or mettā?**

Another case is love (rāga) with craving, which is easily mistaken for mettā or loving-kindness. It is important to realise the difference. Thinking that what we feel is wholesome, we fall into wrong view -- another, more serious, unwholesomeness.

## Mistaking evil for good

Myanmar people wrongly use "mettā" for love when they say, "I love you with mettā." That is not mettā, as loving-kindness is a pure state of wishing for the others' well-being and happiness. The word is derived from "mitta" or friend -- but not in the sense of boy- or girl-friend. Yet so easily does it slip into rāga (lust) or tanhā (attachment), which is very dangerous as it no longer has the spirit and attitude of a friend. Pure mettā does not cause unhappiness or worry; it only leads to compassion. Yet for many it is unavoidable to have it mixed with unwholesomeness and therefore it becomes impure: such as a mother's love. Unlike what many would think, it is mixed -- sometimes mettā, sometimes tanhā or attachment.

## Mistaking evil for good

### **Can compassion be sad too?**

When I went to Germany to explain Abhidhamma, many thought that feeling sad for the suffering of their loved ones is karuṇā -- or compassion. It is also the same here, as there is a saying in Myanmar "karuṇā doso": first karuṇā arises, to be followed by dosa which is unwholesome.

Karuṇā as one of the four Brahmavihāras or illimitables is not about feeling sad -- unlike what most people think. The unhappiness that arises in them on seeing the others' suffering is only soka (grief) and domanassa (mental pain) which cannot be wholesome. It is very important to understand and distinguish between the two. The nature of karuṇā, we must know, lies between the two extremes of cruelty and feeling sad: its far and close enemy respectively. Because sadness is quite close to compassion -- unlike cruelty -- on seeing a

### Mistaking evil for good

pitiful sight, one can feel sad and mistake this unhappiness for compassion. In contrast, the latter is a pure, beautiful state of wanting to protect and save people from suffering.

How to understand the difference between karuṇā and sadness?

Imagine two people got into an accident and were hospitalised in the Intensive Care Unit. A visitor who sees the two -- one is a stranger, while the other is his close relative -- will not feel the same way towards them. With the stranger, he may think, "Oh, so pitiful" and may want to help but without the sadness: that is compassion. With his relative, there is not only karuṇā but unhappiness appears. Then it is no more karuṇā but akusala.

## Mistaking evil for good

Sammā ditṭhi or right view is necessary for us to realise what is wholesome and not. Knowing such differences we can thus check our own mind, like people having regular medical checkups. For such mental checkups we do not need a doctor or a lab, only some Abhidhamma knowledge coupled with citta-, vedanā- and dhammānupassanā (or contemplation of consciousness, feelings and mind objects respectively).

\* \* \*

## Mental care

# Mental care

In the supermarket there are so many items of skin care, body care, health care, and hair care to choose from. But what about mental care? People are also concerned about water, air and noise pollution these days but not about mental pollution of the three evil roots of greed, hatred and delusion (lobha, dosa and moha).

When akusala states arise, we never think they are enemies. Instead we mistake them for good friends. Some with dosa are happy! They are even proud of their temper: "Don't test my patience; don't provoke me," they would warn their victim with a stern look -- indeed nobody would dare to.

## Mental care

We do not notice or ignore what is going on within us, being heedless and careless. Twenty-four hours breathing in and out non-stop, but we do not take notice. So careless are we, in eating, talking or thinking about other things. What is going on in the body and mind, we are not mindful or aware -- "mindful-less" is our state.

So long we have been under the grip of akusala:

- of lobha (attachment) -- "Etaṃ mama (this is mine)." With attachment we think we own the object or person. We think this is my eye / body / knowledge / concentration / car / family. By assuming this way, we grasp the object with lobha.

- of māna (conceit) -- "Eso ha masmi (this I am)." We are always thinking in terms of "I", "mine" and



## Mental care

"myself" and our quality by comparing with the others.

- of *ditthi* (wrong view) -- "Eso me *atta* (this is my permanent self)." We hold fast to ourselves as a permanent entity. "At death, my *atta* or soul will take on another body," we think -- same *atta*, new body, as though we were moving into a new house.

According to the Buddha, these views are not as they really are. Instead we should see these dhammas: "This is not mine; this I am not; this is not my permanent entity, just *nāma-rūpa* (body-mind)." We can do so by developing insight knowledge or *sammā paññā* through *vipassanā*, and by learning the Dhamma and Abhidhamma.

The Buddha gave us a technique to free ourselves of mental defilements: to contemplate our mental

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situation, of whatever is arising in our daily life, and to purify our mind. If an unwholesome state arises, we must know. Otherwise we would never be able to remove it.

"I can only meditate in the meditation hall," says a yogi. That is no use. Whatever you are doing -- talking, eating, wherever you are, you must notice and contemplate.

A Dutch student once asked me a very good question: "But how to purify the mind? The mind's so quick: in one second, millions of minds are so quick to appear and disappear."

That is correct. We cannot purify a disappearing mind -- it is gone forever, and cannot return. We have no

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power to change it, to convert lobha, dosa or moha to alobha, adosa and amoha. Yet the mind depends on conditions. Many conditions are in our hands. If we can change these conditions, the mind also changes.

We cannot make or change a mango seed but we can make it sprout by giving it the right conditions or not allow it to sprout by keeping it in a box.

Because of unwise attention (ayoniso manasikāra), akusala arises. We can change to wise attention instead since we cannot convert an unwholesome mind to a wholesome one directly.

When we become angry, we can think in other ways instead of the usual blame and faultfinding. We can reflect that it is a mistake, that we are wrong at times

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too, and that forgiving is divine. Anger will cease instead of increasing. Thus by changing conditions, the mind becomes pure.

We can lead the mind to mahākusala through wise attention, habit and by determining: "I must never let akusala arise." When I wake up, I immediately recite "Namo tassa ..." When you wake up which mind starts? You must check yourself. We should practise this way: in seeing someone, we can think, "May he or she be well and happy."

"Karaṇīya (what should be done), akaraṇīya (what should not be done)," the Buddha stated.

If we do not do what should be done and do what should not, then it would be a great loss for us, and we

### **Mental care**

will end up suffering. The Dhamma should be with us all the time; we should live for Dhamma knowledge. Otherwise we would just remain as only ordinary persons.

\* \* \*

## **Akusala in meditation**

Even in meditation, the most wholesome activity, there can be a lot of unwholesomeness.

Everyone, even monks, is susceptible, even Venerable Anuruddha, a cousin of the Buddha. In his first rains retreat the monk attained jhāna and abhiññā (supernormal power) of the divine eye. To attain arahattamagga should be easy, he thought afterwards. He then switched to vipassanā, but being unable to remove the kilesas or mental defilements, he lost the way.

So he approached Venerable Sāriputta for help:

### Akusala in meditation

"Oh, my friend, I can see a thousand universes with my divine eye. My mindfulness is well-established, my effort's strong, and my concentration works well. But I can't become an arahant. Why?"

"My friend," Venerable Sāriputta pointed out, "You say, 'I can see a thousand universes with my divine eye.' That is your pride (*māna*), an akusala. Don't think about that. Remove it, set it aside because it blocks and disturbs you, so that you can't progress. It is the same in thinking that your concentration, mindfulness and effort are good enough. Thinking like that is restlessness (*uddhacca*). It blocks you from succeeding. Don't think."

"Then you say, 'Why can't I become an arahant?' That shows remorse (*kukkucca*), an evil mental state. These three kinds of evil thought must be removed."

So Venerable Anuruddha followed this advice; by removing his *māna*, *uddhacca* and *kukkucca*, he eventually became an arahant.

## Akusala in meditation

These dhammas are so subtle, how to understand them? A small bit of dust put in our palm causes us no trouble. If it is put into our eye, how will it be? Tears, pain and irritation will result. So to attain enlightenment, even subtle evil can be a great hindrance to higher stages.

Yogis should be careful not to think, "Oh, I can sit easily for two to three hours non-stop," or "I've five years' experience in vipassanā." Not only that, underestimating one's qualities is also māna. Such pride can block progress to enlightenment.

Like and dislike arising during meditation show lobha and dosa in different degrees and levels. For ordinary people, whatever pleasant feeling arises, they



### Akusala in meditation

want more and more. Even some yogis want high concentration for through it they get to experience bliss and watch meditation movies of bright lights and visions. As a result they want to experience it again and again, afraid to lose it. Through this power of concentration, brilliance can emanate from their body so that they think it is enlightenment: this is dangerous as wrong view leads them far from the truth.

In Myanmar some yogis do not pay respect to monks anymore because they think their level of concentration and knowledge is very high: so too is their pride. Thus because of their meditation, unwholesomeness has developed.

As long as yogis cannot remove their attachment to their peaceful states and attainments, they cannot

## Akusala in meditation

progress to higher knowledge.

### **Need to watch the mind**

How can we know whether unwholesomeness is arising at the moment while we are meditating? For instance, a lot of pain arises when we decide to sit longer than usual. Besides anger there can be misgiving: "Is it useful or not? Is it meditation or not I'm doing?" Such thoughts show doubt, a mental defilement.

While sitting yogis may feel sleepy or sad, unwilling to continue, restless, or may be unable to focus: such states show akusala has arisen. Or they ignore the object, thinking of other things: that is moha. When they realise the state they are in, then their mind is no longer akusala.

## Akusala in meditation

If we notice that we have an akusala mind, then it is no longer there since it has become the object of our noting mind which is kusala. (There can be no two minds at one moment.) For instance, a yogi gets angry noting an undesirable object like pain. Then he notices, "I'm angry." That is already another mind at work. Mind is so quick to change with every object. So as the object has changed, the mind notices not the pain but the angry mind. In this way anger has ceased and cannot continue because of the change of object.

However, this is only for those who practise. For non-practitioners, it is more difficult to notice or quickly follow the object without the habitual practice of sati (mindfulness), samādhi (concentration) and paññā (wisdom). In beginners the unwholesome mind repeats a lot before the noting mind can catch on. But with

### Akusala in meditation

stronger mindfulness and concentration, the noting mind should be able to get closer and closer to close the gap.

Depending on kusala, akusala can arise and vice-versa due to attention. "Is this technique true or not? I've been practising for 10 years already." Doubt arises because of wrong attention (ayoniso manasikāra). Or we think, "My work is to practise regularly. Attainment is not my work. When I'm mature, I'll attain -- this is the only way. That's how the Buddha and the arahants were enlightened." Thinking in this way is with right attention.

\* \* \*

Does good really beget good ...

## **Does good really beget good, and bad really beget bad?**

Sometimes we get confused, observing what happens in other people's lives: we see evil people enjoying success, while a good person becomes poorer and poorer. We see countries when they wage war honour their heroes for killing many enemies instead of sending them to the gallows for murder. Is getting honours a good or bad effect? It is a good effect!

The Buddha explained that evil actions result in only evil because nature's law is never wrong. Good kamma never leads to bad effect and vice-versa. If it appears that way it is because there is something hidden, not apparent to us. An evil person has both good

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and bad kamma. He may be doing akusala now which has not yet matured. He is enjoying a good life now due to good kamma in a past life that has matured. If kamma were to give immediate effects, people would be afraid to do any wrong. Instead it is like growing a tree; it will not bear fruit immediately.

## **Waiting for a chance**

Without chance kamma cannot sprout (kamma vipāko acinteyyo), much like robbers waiting for the opportunity to ambush their victims. When conditions come into being, kamma then takes effect. To illustrate this point:

In Burma, a fortune-teller predicted to a client, "Definitely you'll die when a crocodile bites you." Hearing this, the man avoided going near rivers and the sea. One

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day as he was climbing a tree with a knife, he fell. The knife cut open his belly, killing him. It bore a trademark "Crocodile".

In my case I was in such an accident where the car was wrecked. Though I was sitting in front, I was only slightly injured -- yet my seat was twisted with the impact. People thought all would have died. But no one did; only a lady broke a bone.

## **Right conditions**

There is also the question of conditions to consider as these make matters less definite or clear-cut -- even though the Buddha stated that poison is just poison and that any poison has a bad effect. However, the effect can vary, given conditions --that support or detract. It is like

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taking two similar seeds: we grow one in fertile soil, the other in dry soil. The plants cannot be the same in quality given these different conditions. Because of a combination of causes and conditions, a situation becomes more complicated than that of a single cause giving rise to a single effect. So dependent on conditions, the power and quality of unwholesome effects vary.

Day by day, moment by moment, we accumulate kusala together with akusala in varying proportions. For some people with no morality (sīla) and no other good conditions as support, a little evil performed will have great effect for them. What if we were to put a tablespoon of salt into a glass of water? It becomes too salty to be drunk. Put that amount into a water tank or a river, there is no effect, no change. Akusala kamma's effect is this way, depending on the individual. For those



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whose merit is very little, a small amount of unwholesomeness leads to an effect of severe punishment. For those with great kusala, akusala sometimes cannot be avoided. Yet when evil arises, there is not much effect. They get only blame and not much else because of many good conditions that detract.

Let's say two people commit a theft: one is rich and influential, the other is very poor. But the poor man is put in prison, not the rich one. Due to conditions, the effect is not the same.

In Jainism it is held that whoever commits a killing will have rebirth in hell. This view the Buddha never endorsed. It is a cause though we cannot be definite about it. The only exception was Devadatta who caused a schism within the Saṅgha and who also tried to murder

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the Buddha several times. Buddha declared as definite his rebirth in the woeful realm. Why was the Buddha so sure about Devadatta's case? Within him, the Buddha said, no kusala could be pointed out -- all were black: "If there was even a small white dot, I won't say his rebirth in hell as definite."

## **The ultimate condition**

The attainment of realising arahatta magga kusala (arahantship) can destroy all akusala, being very powerful. At the same time no akusala can destroy all kusala because good is the destroyer (pahāyaka) while evil is to be destroyed (pahātabba). So akusala is weaker -- not stronger -- than kusala.

In the immense blackness, kusala -- a small light

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but as powerful as a laser -- can destroy the darkness. Otherwise, people like Aṅgulimāla and Moggallāna would never have been able to break out from saṃsāra.

We can see in the case of Aṅgulimāla, a university student who killed many people following his professor's advice. He even tried to murder the Buddha, shouting, "Stop! Stop!" as he tried to chase after Him.

But on hearing His words, "I've stopped; you haven't stopped," Aṅgulimāla thought it meaningful and asked for an explanation.

The Buddha replied, "I never kill others because I've stopped killing and doing any akusala action. You're still killing so you haven't stopped."

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Āṅgulimāla immediately understood and changed his life from then on. As a monk he began meditating under the Buddha's guidance. Eventually he attained arahatta magga. Despite his numerous killings, the door to the woeful state (apāya) was closed. Since there was to be no more next life, his akusala kamma could not follow him.

As for Moggallāna, his previous kamma was very bad given the murder of his parents in one of his previous lives. In his present (and last life) he was a good person, an educated Brahmin who had ordained under the Buddha. Had he not become an arahant like Āṅgulimāla he would have gone to hell again given his previous kamma's effect. It could now only take effect in his present life. (This is like reducing a convict's jail sentence of 10 years to one year.) So because of it he

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was beaten to death by 500 robbers. But what is being killed compared to rebirth in hell again and again?

Thus kamma can be reduced. If not, what hope have we of escape?

"What is done cannot be undone" -- this cannot be said for whoever does evil, declared the Buddha. Realising the evil done, one commits oneself to abstain henceforth: what's done has been done; from then on, only kusala is to be done. So as kusala gets more and more, and stronger and stronger, there is only greater chance for it to be produced. Bad kamma then is isolated with less chance to appear.

The workings of kamma are so wonderful and practical. We need not be afraid of it, because we can

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avoid it! All depends on us -- not on God or the others. All the energies are within us, not without. By cultivating good, we can escape from bad kamma. Unlike other religions, we need not confess, and pray to God to "pardon me". Nobody will pardon us.

Instead we must rely on ourselves, following guidelines from the learned: to do what should be done, and not to do what should not. In the end, all depends on us.

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## A lottery at death

# A lottery at death

Given our previous innumerable lives a countless amount of kamma has been accumulating. Yet at death only one gets the chance to ripen -- acting like a gunshot to send us to a new life. Though this is much like picking a winning number in a lottery, a lot has to do with the mind's habitual tendencies.

It is usual that habitual ideas arise when we are lying down, or not doing anything in particular. Consider yourself: What kind of ideas usually arises in you when you're alone? Given tendency and inclination, it is usual for an idea to arise again and again as a habit. Let us say we hate somebody. Sometimes hatred comes again and again. We think we will never think about that

### A lottery at death

person, yet such thoughts still arise. This is habitual practice. Near death such a habitual state or emotion will likely be reproduced.

Such persistent mental situations -- whether "black" or "white"-- can overwhelm our mind near death. If black with akusala, it then leads to a "black" rebirth (while a mind "white" with kusala is led to as good rebirth).

Take a person who is again and again angry. This remains as a quality in the thought process, reinforced all the time, given this habitual state of mind. How does this kamma have a chance to produce its effect in the next life?

As one lies dying, an object -- desirable or not --



### A lottery at death

manifests at one of the six sense-doors. One sees, for instance, flowers a friend has brought or hears chanting just as one passes away.

But this is unlike normal times. Concerning one's destination: nothing can be for sure or predicted.

### **Dying with an unwholesome mind**

A matured kamma (pure or impure) can enter the mind to create its last object: like a mirror reflection that cannot be controlled. It can occur through the mind-door in a dream.

For that anger-prone person on his deathbed, such an emotion could surface again. What will be his

### A lottery at death

feeling then? Not peaceful, yes? He could dream of confronting an enemy, or of using abusive words to scold someone. He could dream of being surrounded by enemies coming to pull him towards a fire. That is why he starts shouting, "Save me! Save me! They're pulling me into the fire!" Dying with that kind of mind is terrible for rebirth. In such a situation, his bad destination he already sees.

At death for anyone in great pain -- even for monks and nuns -- should anger or sadness arise, rebirth will be in a bad destination. In the Buddha's lifetime a monk was offered a set of robes by his sister. He kept it near him intending to wear it the next morning. During the night he fell ill and passed away -- his mind still wanting to wear the robes. So he was reborn a louse there. Though he had been practising meditation for over 50 years, he was now a louse!

## A lottery at death

In Myanmar stories are common about people who in spite of various meritorious acts acquired a bad rebirth due to the way they died. One was an old lady who did a lot of *dāna*, offered water to travellers and kept her precepts (*sīla*). On her deathbed, her children's crying caused her unhappiness. So after death she became a ghost.

We must be careful at a person's deathbed because of our influence at the time of dying. It is usual when a parent is near death, for the sons and daughters to cry at the bedside. Their grief makes the parent unhappy too and so prevents him or her from having a good rebirth. Some children are not even like that. They keep pestering: "Where did you keep the bank books? Where did you hide the ornaments?" For the dying person, this also cannot cause a better rebirth.

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### Signs of the next destination

Dying in anger leads one to rebirth in hell. One could also dream of fire, then -- thinking that it is gold -- wishes to have it. This kammic force pushes one to rebirth in hell. For whoever is to be born there, it is usually like jumping into a deep black hole -- unwillingly -- pushed by kammic force into a woeful state of suffering or vinipāta<sup>3</sup>. Sometimes a person will dream he is among animals like cows, dogs or horses. Such an indication (gati nimitta) is a registration for the next life as an animal. For people who die with attachment (lobha), without referring to other conditions, they are mostly reborn as petas or ghosts. If they are greatly attached to their house, they become a ghost or python there. In Myanmar they are referred to as "treasure-

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3 Vinipāta = vini (without wish to) + pati (fall down).

## A lottery at death

guardians".

## Changing the near-death situation for the better

If there is no weighty kamma to pull a dying person down to rebirth in hell, that person's āsanna kamma<sup>4</sup> can be changed for the better. For example, the father of Venerable Sona of Anuraddhapura had been a hunter. Now in his old age he was persuaded by his son to become a monk. Near death, the father had fearful dreams of killing and being chased by dogs. He was shouting, "Please save me, many dogs are coming for me!" The Venerable then knew that his rebirth would be in the woeful state. So he carried the dying man to the

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4 *Āsanna* (near death) kamma is one that is done or renewed at the moment of dying. If there is no weighty (*garuka*) kamma that takes priority, this *āsanna* kamma has the chance to ripen.

### A lottery at death

pagoda. There, he offered flowers and candles, and told his father to worship the Buddha: that he was in a safe place now and need no longer fear anymore.

The old man's dream then changed, now seeing beautiful ladies coming towards him. It was then that he died. That showed his rebirth was to be in the deity world.

As a friend or relative of the dying person, we can try in the same way to make his mind pleasant and to console him. It is especially good to point out his good deeds done during his lifetime. We can say to him, "We are offering flowers and candle light to the Buddha. Please pay attention to it. That is your merit."

As for ourselves, we should thus work now to

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improve the mind. In the last five minutes of our life we cannot do anything about it.

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## The rarity of human rebirth

# The rarity of human rebirth

So long as there is akusala, there is a next life. As long as it is not removed, we will be reborn in a woeful state.

Very few people have the chance to have human rebirth, said the Buddha, because human life is produced by only one kind of wholesome consciousness (mahākusala vipāka citta). The Buddha Himself was born with its superior type, the one accompanied by a pleasant feeling.

What sets humans apart from the other beings of the lower realms?



## The rarity of human rebirth

Unlike those others a human (or manussa in Pāḷi) is one who should \* know good from bad, merit from demerit, and moral from immoral \* have a noble mind (with the four brahmavihāras).

Yet most people are either forgetful, heedless or sceptical in acquiring merit: by doing charity, keeping moral precepts or cultivating the mind. Yet only through it can one obtain human life. Otherwise, if the cause is not good enough (they cannot qualify under the criteria) and end up in apāya<sup>5</sup> instead, taking various forms as ghosts, asuras or petas; or as animals and even hell-beings.

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5 Apāya = apa (far) + aya (meritorious action, kusala) = little opportunity to do merit, far from kusala (to meditate, hold sīla, and offer dāna).

## The rarity of human rebirth

### **In the realm of ghosts and petas**

Do you believe in unseen beings such as ghosts? Many people are sceptical about what they cannot see. "Seeing is believing," they say. Yet they readily accept the presence of air and gases which cannot be seen. Let me tell you about my own experience.

When I was around seven years old, with my elder brother I visited a house in my village one evening. A lady there had died a few days earlier. My brother entered the house. As I was afraid to enter, I remained outside in front of a big tamarind tree. Then I heard the sound of someone approaching behind. I turned to look and saw a bamboo stick but nobody holding it: only the stick hitting the tree. It looked as though someone unseen was using it to strike the tree. Till today I can see it -- its length and colour. Though it was dusk there was still enough light to see the stick beating the tree,

## The rarity of human rebirth

hearing the sound, but seeing no one. I started to cry, being so afraid. My brother came out and brought me home (I was so fearful for a while I could not bear to look at tamarind trees.)

There are many beings that cannot be seen according to the Buddha (such as petas in His stories of petas, Petavatthu). However, if they wish to, we can see them. For those who have successfully practised samatha and attained the divine eye, such as Venerable Moggallāna, these petas can be clearly seen.

One day, the Venerable with Venerable Lakkhaṇa came down from Vulture's Peak to Rājagaha for almsround. At one point, Moggallāna looked up and smiled. When his companion asked why he smiled, Moggallāna said to ask him again in the Buddha's

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presence. In the evening together with the Buddha, Moggallāna explained that he saw a wonderful being: only a skeleton flying in the sky above, followed by birds pecking at it. Why smile at such a pitiful being? "We're very lucky to have escaped from such suffering."

The Buddha agreed, having seen it Himself while sitting at the Bodhi Tree. He did not tell anyone: people might not believe Him. The skeleton, He said, was once a butcher who had been killing cows. He had been born in hell and was now a peta because he used to remove flesh from their carcasses. His gati nimitta (registration of rebirth) had been a skeleton (Lakkhaṇa Saṃyutta, Saṃyutta Nikāya).

In general petas and asuras are always hungry, thirsty and without shelter. The latter are like the

## The rarity of human rebirth

majority of poor people who have to work the whole day with little enjoyment. Sometimes they are known to disturb humans.

If a person has a strong attachment to the family and household but who has not committed any killing or stealing, at death he is likely to be reborn as a ghost in his own house. This is because excessive attachment is unwholesome. I remember my experience of such a house.

## **A ghost's house in Kuala Lumpur**

When I was studying in Sri Lanka, on a visit to Malaysia in 1991, I stayed overnight in Damansara, a quiet, rich residential area in Kuala Lumpur. When we entered the house that evening, no owner was there yet

## The rarity of human rebirth

everything was in place: the phone, TV, etc. When I opened the windows, I saw neighbours peeping at us. Because of their curiosity, I thought at once that the house was haunted. I was quite afraid then. Another monk was with me. We slept in the same room and talked about the Dhamma and meditation; near midnight we chanted parittas before sleeping. Nothing happened during the night.

Early next morning I awoke and used the toilet to wash my face. As I was coming out, the door made a noise, "Chiii..." as it closed by itself behind me. And it was locked from the inside. That was funny because I had not pushed the lock. We had to search for the key to open it because our towels and things were inside.

Later at breakfast I inquired whether it was

### The rarity of human rebirth

haunted and why nobody stayed there. Someone replied, "Yes, and you used his favourite toilet."

It seemed that the house owner had died in that room where we had slept. The family would not stay there afterwards because he was not quiet, always moving things about. So they moved elsewhere. That house was kept for monks only because when laypeople used to stay there, he would make trouble for them: the lights would be switched off, the door closed, the TV switched off, or the phone would ring.

Nowadays people know how to free such ghosts from their houses. The Buddha's way is to offer something to the Saṅgha, that is, to do merit on the ghost's behalf, and share the merits with the departed. When he agrees and says "Well done," his life is changed

## The rarity of human rebirth

from then on for the better, as he has received the merits for rebirth.

### **A haunted office in Yangon**

I was involved in such an event of freeing some ghosts last year, this time in Yangon itself, at Citymart, Junction 8. There had been a bomb blast two years earlier in that building, and some people had been killed. The problem then arose in one office on the seventh floor, whose owner happened to be a Christian. People could never stay the night there because things were always being shifted about. The residents on the sixth floor below could not sleep. Yet when they went up to check, they saw nothing. Eventually they had to call the police to investigate because it was happening every night.



## The rarity of human rebirth

Finally they came to ITBMU<sup>6</sup> to request us to chant parittas for protection from these ghosts. I led a group of five monks to the office. We advised the people concerned to take the Three Refuges, to observe the five precepts, and to share merits with the ghosts who were creating the noises. We then invited the "ghosts" to come participate in the Dhamma and the merit-sharing, and afterwards not to stay there any longer. Since then, there was quiet, as nothing more happened. Yet we saw nothing.

## Animal rebirth

Compared to humans and ghosts, there is greater suffering in the animal kingdom. Indeed, their suffering

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6 International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University of Yangon.

### The rarity of human rebirth

is second only to that of hell-beings. The Buddha explained their situation: they eat each other up -- the small by the bigger ones, the weak by the strong. There is no protection at all. All they can do is run but they cannot escape. I once saw in Myanmar chickens with their legs bound up and carried off to be sold and eaten by humans.

Most of the time their minds are unwholesome as they are preoccupied with only three things: on seeing food they run to eat; with competition, they attack the others; and then they want to sleep. It is the same even for household pets. There is little chance for wholesomeness to arise, with no way of escape from their kind of life.

However, "woeful state" is not a correct term for

## The rarity of human rebirth

some of these household pets. Some live very luxuriously (more so than many ordinary people) in a rich man's house, travel by car, are looked after by a doctor, have better food than some people, get shampooed regularly, and sleep on a bed. They sleep all the time and only bark at night. So we cannot say these dogs and cats are in a woeful state as they lead a very comfortable and blissful life. The more accurate meaning is that they have little opportunity for doing merit.

According to the Buddha, with little chance for doing kusala, these animals will be reborn again in a woeful state since they live in lobha, dosa and moha practically all the time. They do not know what should or should not be done; they have no chance of receiving the Dhamma, or associating with the noble ones. Dhamma practice, sīla and dāna are beyond them.

## The rarity of human rebirth

So we should have compassion for any kind of being. As the Buddha taught: so long is saṃsāra, they must have been once our brother, father or mother. We ourselves can be born as deity or animal in turn. We should not torture but to be kind to them. With a dying creature, a dog, for instance, we should console and chant parittas to it -- because as an animal, it is very difficult to get back to human life.

## Niraya: place of no happiness

Hell-beings suffer the worst in comparison with the others. In niraya<sup>7</sup> there can be no happiness.

According to the Buddha, hell-beings only

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<sup>7</sup> Niraya = ni(r) (no, absence) + aya (happiness) = always suffering, in pain, no happiness at all.

## The rarity of human rebirth

experience objects that cause unhappiness -- see only fearful sights, hear nothing kind, only fearful sounds, smell only bad odours, with no fresh air. There is even no chance to close the nose. There is only very bad taste. It is always uncomfortable, with painful touch (an equivalent I heard would be the electric cane in Singapore). For instance, imagine being hit with a spear 300 times in the morning, afternoon, and night or having to live inside a fire.

In Buddhist cosmology there are thousands of universes. Between a cluster of three, there is a triangular space within which no light of sun, moon or stars can enter (much like the black hole of astrophysics): this is lokantara<sup>8</sup> niraya.

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<sup>8</sup> Lokantara = loka (universe) + antara (between, among).

## The rarity of human rebirth

One type of hell is situated there: the temperature is so cold because there is no sun. It is an iceland with no light at all. Beings are born there because they do not pay respect to their parents, but torture and kill them instead. They cannot see at all, like bats, and are not able to get food. Should they happen to meet accidentally, they try to eat each other. Falling into water, they liquidify.

In such hells of fire and ice, how to have mahākusala or wholesomeness? If you have a toothache or a headache, you take paracetamol. If you still cannot relieve the pain -- I have experienced such a toothache -- you cannot sleep the whole night. Imagine that hell-beings suffer more than that, more than us. It is almost impossible to have mahākusala.

## The rarity of human rebirth

Sometimes the Venerable Moggallāna would visit hell. With his mental power he would extinguish the hell-fire and would preach the Dhamma to the suffering beings. They would look up and listen; in that moment mahākusala would arise.

Such a chance is impossible nowadays.

\* \* \*

Do you know where you're going?

## **Do you know where you're going?**

"Many people like us do good and bad all the time, that is, we're being in the middle. We don't meditate, we just live our life. We have a house, a family. We love our children. We go to work. We don't do especially bad things, that is, we never commit really evil things. How do we know then what happens at death? Who or what decides where we'll go after death?"

(Question asked by a participant in an Abhidhamma class in Naarden, Holland, 2004.)

First, it is crucial to know what is wholesome and what is not; also to know what is habitually produced in the mind: these are the factors that decide.



## Do you know where you're going?

In many Suttas the Buddha emphasised the 10 wholesome actions<sup>9</sup> (or the dhamma of humans) that distinguish people from animals. If we were to follow these, He guaranteed that we would not fall into the woeful state, we would only wander about in saṃsāra. Anyone, any non-Buddhist, following these would also find a good rebirth as these precepts do not concern religion. They define only basic "human-ness" that cannot be further reduced.

Not only cultivating kusala kamma in daily life, we

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9 Ten wholesome actions: 1. charity (dāna) 2. morality (sīla) 3. meditation (bhāvanā) 4. giving due respect to the others (apacāyana) 5. rendering service (veyyāvacca) 6. sharing merits (pattidāna) 7. rejoicing at and appreciation (pattānumodanā) 8. listening well to the Dhamma (dhammasavana) 9. teaching the Dhamma to others (dhammadesanā) 10. right belief (diṭṭhijukamma).

Do you know where you're going?

should abstain from the 10 akusala actions<sup>10</sup>: this is a basic good practice that gives good result.

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10 Bodily misconduct: 1. killing living beings (pāṇātipātā) 2. taking others' properties that are not given (adinnādāna) 3. sexual misconduct (kāmesumicchācārā). Verbal misconduct: 4. telling lies (musāvāda) 5. malicious talk or setting one against the other (pisuṇāvācā) 6. harsh and abusive speech (pharusāvācā) 7. vain talk that is unbeneficial (samphappalāpa). Mental misconduct: 8. covetousness (abhiḥjhā) 9. ill-will (byāpāda) 10. wrong view (micchādiṭṭhi).

Do you know where you're going?

## **Who is to know?**

Some people cheat themselves by lying to themselves. What is morality for then? Some may have done evil in secret unlike the Buddha who had never acted evilly even in secret. This was because there is no hiding place to do akusala, He said. There is nowhere hidden for anyone who commits evil because he himself knows. Since he knows, it is no longer secret: which was what U Thant said.

The former Secretary-General of the United Nations was once shown a draft of his biography.

He gave it back to the author unread. The writer told him to go ahead and make changes in the text as he liked as nobody would know. However, U Thant replied, "But I know, and that's more important."

Do you know where you're going?

As a start sīla is for happiness without worry or regret. The Buddha said that we would experience happiness without fault through innocence -- better than any enjoyment of sensual pleasure. Not only that, for yogis, it leads to deepening of concentration and thence to knowledge (paññā) in meditation.

It is also necessary to learn how to contemplate and restrain the mind since the root conditions of these unwholesomeness are greed, anger and delusion (lobha, dosa and moha) that usually arise in an uncontrolled mind. Otherwise, because under the influence of moha we think what's bad as good and what's good as bad. Because of moha all unwholesomeness arises, given its nature of concealing the side of goodness.

Do you know where you're going?

People who do misconduct do not know at the time that it should not be done. Afterwards, they realise it is not good, and then they apologise. So moha is very dangerous as the root of all evil. To remove it, to get right attention and attitude, we should learn and practise the Dhamma from learned teachers, and rely on their advice. Most fundamental of the Dhamma to know are the Four Noble Truths and cause-and-effect. The Buddha's teaching is to remove moha through right understanding (sammādiṭṭhi). According to the order of practice of sīla, samādhī and paññā (of the Noble Eightfold Path), right understanding comes first -- even in maintaining sīla and in meditation.

## **Conditions are all-important**

Good conditions are important as a start to acquire good attitudes, intentions and habits. Good

Do you know where you're going?

advice is vital too. As the majority are not noble persons (ariya), their advice is asaddhamma. Should you follow such, you will probably be led to act wrongly.

For instance, if we were brought up with such advice as "animals are made by God for us to eat" or "animals suffer in saṃsāra; so it is better to kill them now," we would have little feeling of guilt to kill them. During the Buddha's lifetime because of Devadatta's counsel, Prince Ajātasattu was led to kill his father. Yet he had the potential of attaining arahantship with the Buddha's guidance. Instead he fell into hell.

Not to associate with the wise causes less harm than associating with fools.

Do you know where you're going?

## **Kusala as investment for the future**

Many people think to do good for the future life. But now is more important: to be happy, without worry or regret, and not only for the next life.

When we were young, we had to study in school -- not for the future life but for later in this life. Why do you send your children to school? You think of the later effect that they will be graduates one day with a better life through education.

We know only this present life, about the future life, we are not sure. Everything we act is for this life: to avoid evil, and to do good. In this way we are fault-free. In society we are good people with a good reputation which cannot be bought. These are the effects. If we do bad things, not only the next life will be worse for us.

Do you know where you're going?

It is like two boys being sent to school by the parents. One boy studies, becomes a doctor later in life who works hard with a good livelihood. The other does not study, runs away, mixes with bad company, becomes a drunkard and lands up in jail. His future is different from the first boy's. So good present conditions lead to a better life and better circumstances; while bad conditions lead to a worse life. This is only natural.

So we should cultivate kusala, avoid akusala, not for the next life but for later this life. If we are good people today, tomorrow we will be good too. Buddhist practice is very simple really: being only cause-and-condition.

I hope your knowledge is increased by attending



Do you know where you're going?

Dhamma classes, listening to and reading the Dhamma with knowledge and comprehension. At least there should be good factors like effort and mindfulness to replace wrong thought with right thought. Don't think it is natural to follow human nature.

\* \* \*

Sādhu! Sādhu! Sādhu!

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*We apologize for any inadvertent omissions or misspelling of names.*



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*May all the departed relatives, teachers and friends  
rejoice in the merit of this Dhamma-dana  
May they be well, happy and peaceful.*

*May all the loved ones, all beings, too,  
share in the merits gained,  
Enjoy good health, prosperity and happiness,  
Cultivate loving-kindness and wisdom,  
Culminating in the cessation of all suffering.*



***Sādhu! Sādhu! Sādhu!***

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## **VIPASSANĀ (INSIGHT) MEDITATION CENTRES IN MALAYSIA**

- **SASANARAKKHA BUDDHIST SANCTUARY (SBS)**  
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Tel/Fax: 03-7873 9168 Email: [sbvms@yahoo.com](mailto:sbvms@yahoo.com)
- **SUBANG JAYA BUDDHIST ASSOCIATION (SJBA)**  
Lot 12593 Jalan Kewajipan, SS13 Subang Jaya, 47500 Petaling Jaya, Selangor  
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Tel: 05-805 2977 / 05-806 6842 Email: [sbsmail@maxis.net.my](mailto:sbsmail@maxis.net.my)

## SUGGESTED WEBSITES FOR PĀLI SCRIPTURE STUDIES

- Access to Insight  
<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/>
- Ancient Buddhist Text  
<http://www.ancient-buddhist-texts.net/>
- Bhavana Society  
<http://www.bhavanasociety.org/>
- Bodhi Monastery  
<http://www.bodhimonastery.net>
- The Buddhist Society Western Australia  
<http://www.bswa.org/>
- Chattha Sangayana - VRI  
<http://www.tipitaka.org/index.shtml>
- The Dharmafarer Website  
<http://dharmafarer.googlepages.com/>
- Sutta Central  
<http://www.suttacentral.net/>
- Sutta Readings  
<http://www.suttareadings.net/>
- eTipitaka Quotation  
<http://studies.worldtipitaka.org/>
- Wikipitaka – The Completing Tipitaka  
[http://tipitaka.wikia.com/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://tipitaka.wikia.com/wiki/Main_Page)



Studies (CBS) in Sagaing, which is connected to Mahāsubhodayon Monastery and serves foreigners for further studies and practice.

The Sayādaw's teaching method is very individual, lively, practical and practicable with many examples and references from daily life, from the Suttas, Abhidhamma-books and commentaries. Sayādaw is teaching in English and with a lot of humour and Mettā.

Self-study is necessary within all his Abhidhamma courses, to become familiar with the structure and logic of Abhidhamma and the most important Pāli-terms. Formal meditation-periods are included too.

Sayādaw says "The Lord Buddha always pointed out first the harmful: what should not be done. As in: 'Not to do evil, To cultivate good' (Sabbapāpassa akaraṇaṃ, kusalassa upasampadā). The reason being not doing evil (akusala) is more important than not doing good (kusala). However "To cultivate good" goes together with "Not to do evil". If we cultivate good -- non-greed (alobha) for instance -- greed (lobha) is gone. We must try to find delight in good, though it would be like going upstream against the current."

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